

6-1-2012

Is the Lady for Real?

Hugh Belsey

Elizabeth Hamlett

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine>

Recommended Citation

Belsey, Hugh and Hamlett, Elizabeth (2012) "Is the Lady for Real?," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 55 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol55/iss2/5>

This Article is made available online by Journals, part of the Furman University Scholar Exchange (FUSE). It has been accepted for inclusion in Furman Magazine by an authorized FUSE administrator. For terms of use, please refer to the [FUSE Institutional Repository Guidelines](#). For more information, please contact scholarexchange@furman.edu.



Is the Lady for Real?

*The history
and mystery
of White Oaks'
signature
painting.*

By Hugh Belsey &
Elizabeth Hamlett

In the drawing room of White Oaks, the Furman president's home, a portrait of a woman hangs above the fireplace. With an almost imperceptible expression she gazes upon the room, which is adorned with antique art and furniture.

The painting, *Portrait of Lady Impey*, is the crown jewel in a collection that was carefully acquired by Charles and Homozel Mickel Daniel, generous Furman supporters who were the original owners of White Oaks. Charles Daniel's company built many of the original buildings on campus, and the university's dining hall and chapel are named in his honor. Mrs. Daniel, for whom the music building is named, dedicated much time to collecting 18th- and 19th-century European antiques to furnish their Georgian-style home.

Although she owned many beautiful pieces of art and furniture, Mrs. Daniel seemed intent upon purchasing a "masterpiece" painting for White Oaks. Toward this end, in the fall of 1975 she and several friends took a trip to New York City. Although she and her husband, who died in 1964, had collected many fine paintings, none would be so easily recognized or widely praised as the works by Renoir, Corot and Gainsborough that she and her friends perused during their visit to M. Knoedler & Company.

After some contemplation and correspondence with the gallery, Mrs. Daniel settled on a painting by the acclaimed English artist Thomas Gainsborough — his 1786 half-length portrait of Lady Mary Impey, the wife of an imperial judge in India. Mrs. Daniel proudly displayed the painting in the most prominent room in White Oaks, where it has remained.

When she died in 1992, she bequeathed White Oaks and all of its contents to Furman. The next year, the many fine pieces in the home were



appraised by Sotheby's, the fine art auction house.

When the appraisers examined *Portrait of Lady Impey*, however, they were perplexed. Although Mrs. Daniel had been told the painting was a Gainsborough, they were not convinced.

Many paintings have been falsely attributed to Thomas Gainsborough, and the high prices his works commanded between 1880 and 1930 brought many spurious paintings onto the market. The appraisers felt that this was one of those cases.

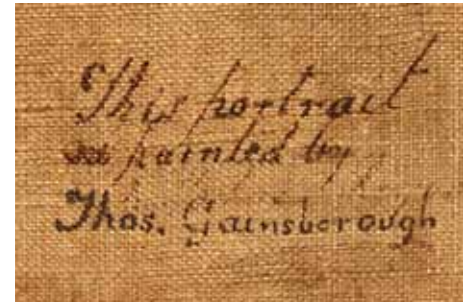
The staff at Sotheby's believed that the portrait was instead painted by Gainsborough's nephew, Gainsborough Dupont, who often copied or completed his uncle's works. As if to prove the seriousness of their assessment, they valued the portrait at less than one-sixth of the original 1975 purchase price. While the university accepted the Sotheby's evaluation, questions remained about the painting and its provenance.

IN 2010 THE CASE WAS REOPENED

when Andrew Impey, great-great-great-great grandson of Lady Impey, read an article online about White Oaks that mentioned the portrait. He contacted Furman from his home in the United Kingdom.

Over the next two years he and Elizabeth Coker Hamlett, Furman's collections manager, corresponded about the painting and its origin. Along the way they learned that there is at least one other painting that is purported to be the Gainsborough portrait of Lady Impey. In doing research on the second painting, however, Hamlett discovered that Furman's portrait matched exactly the dimensions of the original Gainsborough painting— lending credence to the idea that Furman owned the real thing.

Given this finding, Andrew Impey asked



a friend at the National Portrait Gallery in London to review photos of Furman's painting. The curator confirmed that the painting looked like a Gainsborough, but said the only way to know for certain was for the painting to be examined in person by a Gainsborough expert.

Last fall, Impey contacted the foremost expert on Thomas Gainsborough's life and works: Hugh Belsey, a senior research fellow at the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art in London who was curator at the Gainsborough's House museum in Sudbury for 23 years. Belsey has written extensively about Gainsborough and has probably examined more Gainsborough paintings than anyone. For the past eight years he has been compiling a complete catalog of the artist's portraits.

Belsey agreed to visit Furman in March to examine the portrait. His one request was that he present a public lecture, which was quickly arranged. Furman's Decorative and Fine Arts Committee, which oversees the university's almost 3,000-piece collection of art and antiques, sponsored Belsey's visit.

During two whirlwind days he examined *Portrait of Lady Impey* and delivered a lecture on the painting to a full house in Patrick Lecture Hall. At the end of his presentation, he revealed that Furman's painting is the true Gainsborough portrait — although it has undergone serious modifications through the years.

As an art historian who approaches the discipline as a connoisseur, Belsey poses the same questions for each painting: Did Gainsborough

paint it? If he did, when was it painted? Who is the sitter? And how has it changed? He concedes that you can try to answer each question from a good reproduction, but when you are asking the first and the final questions, ideally you need to see the painting itself.

In his lecture, Belsey explained that Lady Impey was the wife of the Chief Justice of Bengal, where the couple developed an appreciation for Indian culture, collecting Mughal miniatures and allowing their children to dress as natives. Mary Impey was particularly interested in the local flora and fauna and commissioned three native artists to make drawings of her family.

When the Impeys returned to London in 1783, they maintained their interest in art. Three years later, on April 20, 1786, the *Morning Herald* newspaper first mentioned a Gainsborough portrait of Lady Impey, reporting that "those who have seen it praise it as descriptive of her Ladyship's unaffected manners and natural character."

The portrait would pass through a number of hands. It was inherited by one of Lady Impey's daughters, who married Sir Robert Affleck, and eventually descended to the wife of her grandson (Maria Emily, or Lady Affleck). Lady Affleck offered it for sale at auction; it was bought by Marquess George Curzon, who, as a former Viceroy of India, no doubt knew that the subject of the portrait had shared his fascination with the subcontinent. Curzon's nephew sold the painting in 1930, after which it passed from dealer to dealer until M. Knoedler & Company sold it to Mrs. Daniel.

DURING HIS EXAMINATION BELSEY

found that the portrait had all the traits of a canvas that had been on the market for some time. The canvas was relined, a process that strengthens the painting's support by sticking a second canvas to the back of the original one. But in this case, the relining had not been carefully executed, and the weave of the canvas had been forced through the original paint layer.

The painting also sported a French-style frame. In the 1780s, Gainsborough's head-and-shoulder portraits were generally painted in an oval shape on a rectangular canvas and presented in a simple rectangular frame. An oval slip, a piece of decorative molding that fits inside a larger frame, covered the unpainted corners of the canvas. For whatever reason, the art market wanted a rectangular canvas in a rectangular frame, and so at some point it appears that someone painted in the corners of the portrait to fit the frame.

The portrait had been tinkered with in other ways as well, probably in some misguided effort to "improve" it. Lady Impey's hair had been altered and a hat added, perhaps to mimic the look of another Gainsborough work with a famous back story: his portrait of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, which dates to 1785.

In 1876 the portrait of Georgiana was purchased by a London art dealer for what at the time was a record for a painting at auction: \$51,540, according to *The New York Times*. Three weeks later it was stolen in a dramatic night raid. The thief, Adam Worth — on whom



Gainsborough expert Hugh Belsey spent an intense day examining the Lady Impey portrait. The label attached to the back of the painting and the inscription etched in the canvas added intrigue to the investigation, given the alterations to the painting over the years. Photos by Jeremy Fleming.

Arthur Conan Doyle based the character of Moriarty, Sherlock Holmes' adversary — was eventually tracked down and the painting returned to London. It was immediately sold to J. Pierpont Morgan and remained in his family until the Duke of Devonshire purchased it in 1994.

The excitement surrounding the painting of the duchess produced many column inches, and enterprising china manufacturers popularized it in busts, full-length models and transfer prints. The duchess' image was as popular as Gainsborough's *Blue Boy*, his most acclaimed work, and it inspired Edwardian women to wear a broad-brimmed hat decorated with an ostrich feather. It is likely that, to comply with contemporary fashion, such a hat was added to Lady Impey's portrait.

Belsey also noted "disturbances" in the surface of the paint layer in Lady Impey's dress that appear to show some changes in the costume. Originally she may have worn a gauze scarf over her chest, and the decoration around the neckline may have been a dog-tooth lace collar rather than a gauze flounce, which would be in tune with the style of her slashed sleeves. Indeed, the brushstrokes across the chest are clumsy and uncharacteristic of Gainsborough's style. Perhaps during cleaning a restorer discovered an earlier costume beneath that was too damaged to expose, and replaced the damaged area with the arrangement we see today.

SO NOW THAT WE KNOW THAT

the Furman portrait is indeed a Thomas Gainsborough, what of its future? Should it be restored so that it is closer to its original 18th-century appearance? Or should the changes in the portrait be considered part of its history?

One concern Belsey noted is that, considering its condition, any effort to restore the painting might actually cause more harm than good — even though its value, which Furman chooses not to disclose, has already been diminished by the modifications it has undergone through the years.

Perhaps the answer is best provided in the context of the portrait's display. *Portrait of Lady Impey* remains the centerpiece of the White Oaks drawing room and is a monument to Mrs. Daniel's taste. That deserves some respect, and so, in this case, arguably the painting should be left as it is.

As Martha Johns, wife of former Furman president John Johns and a resident of White Oaks from 1992 to 1994, said, "It's not perfect, but it's our Gainsborough." [F]

Visit the *Events and Exhibitions* link at <http://library.furman.edu/dfac> to see Belsey's lecture. Elizabeth Coker Hamlett is a 2002 Furman graduate.



Profile: Thomas Gainsborough

- ☞ Born in 1727 in Sudbury, Suffolk.
- ☞ Worked in Suffolk, Bath and London.
- ☞ Master of 18th-century portraiture and landscapes.
- ☞ Credited with more than 900 portraits of English sitters, including commissions from the royal family, and more than 200 landscapes.
- ☞ Founding member, Royal Academy of Arts.
- ☞ Inspired by the work of Van Dyck and Rubens.
- ☞ Influenced noted 19th-century artist John Constable, also a native of Suffolk.
- ☞ Best known painting: *Blue Boy* (c. 1770), an homage to Van Dyck.
- ☞ Died in 1788.